



True Strength – Part 1

The Power & Weakness of Your Experiences

Pastor Mike Fabarez

Now imagine with me that we are needing to hire another staff pastor here at Compass and imagine with me that we are in the process of that and I have a big stack of recommendation letters on my desk for a particular candidate. Imagine that I'm excited to read these letters of recommendation because Jim, the candidate, has a great theological education and he has some good pastoral experience under his belt. And imagine that I'm about to read some of these letters of reference, and it's your job to tell me what I should make of these recommendations. And I begin to read them. Letter number one, Jim makes the best pulled pork sandwiches I've ever tasted. Number two, I've never met anyone who enjoys sunsets more than Pastor Jim. Okay. Pastor Jim once prayed for a parking space at Costco and he found one in under 30 seconds. When watching Toy Story 3 with our family, Pastor Jim cried at the ending. It was so sweet. Pastor Jim once told me he had a dream where he was preaching to 10,000 people. Not a thousand, 10,000. Can you imagine that? Speaking of dreams, same letter, Pastor Jim has a lot of dreams. He keeps a notebook by his bed. He has a journal filled with hundreds of amazing dreams. The last one I'll read for you of the imaginary reference letters. Pastor Jim is the nicest pastor I've ever met. He's never said anything I disagree with. (audience laughing)

I hope you would say we need more letters of recommendation. I hope you'd say that. And I hope you could easily imagine that we need some different kinds of recommendations. Right? We need references that are altogether different. And I wonder what kinds of recommendations would come to your mind that we would need for a would-be pastor or a would-be Bible study leader, or a would-be small group leader, or a would-be discipler in our discipleship program, or a would-be you for the next season of your fruitful Christian life. What would it be to have a reference that would make it feel like you're ready for that? Well, I have two words that I think would be a great recommendation. And they consist of the title of the series that we are embarking on for the next five weeks. It's right there at the top of your worksheet, it's on the bulletin. And that consists of these two words "True Strength." True strength. That'd be great if accurately someone could say of you, here is a Christian who possesses true strength, real, biblical, godly, true strength. That'd be great. Now, that sounds odd, particularly if we read several passages of Scripture like the last one that we ended with in Second Corinthians Chapter 11, where Paul is saying he's going to boast of his weaknesses. That seems like the opposite of strength. But as we liked to point out last week as we look back at the very beginning, at least we referenced the very beginning of the book of Second Corinthians Chapter 1 verse 8, Paul talks about how weak he was when he was in Asia, and he tells these Corinthians I didn't "want you to be unaware, brothers, of all the afflictions we experienced in Asia," because I was despairing even of life, he says. So that he said this happened to me so that I would not depend or "rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead."

See, now that shift in trust, that shift in his faith, that was huge, right? That kind of thing needed to happen often. As we're about to get into next week, Lord willing, in Second



Corinthians Chapter 12 verse 7 and following, we're going to get into one of the very famous sections of Second Corinthians where Paul talks about his thorn in the flesh. Do you remember that passage? Well, we'll talk about that next time. Another ongoing reminder of how Paul had to shift his reliance, his faith, his confidence in God. And you know what happens when that takes place? You become a very strong Christian. And that is God's intention. And it'd be good if someone could say of you, and it certainly is something that would prepare you for whatever comes next in terms of your fruitful impact in this world and on other Christians and just all around you to be a fruitful person, we would like you to be truly strong, and that's what we hope for, and that's what we plan for. And certainly when it comes to people in your life who you want to lead you and we're going to hire Pastor Jim, you would want him to be a spiritually strong person, a truly strong person. And we'd need to sort through the kinds of resumés that we would say, though, this isn't it. And if all we had were the kinds of things that I just fictitiously read to you, you'd say well that is certainly not it. And that is what Paul is trying to say to these Corinthians about the hard pass that they should give to these super-apostles, which of course is dripping with sarcasm because these guys, that's all they have. They have an inflated resumé filled with things that really don't consist in true biblical strength. It's just a lot of hot air, and you need to look past all of that.

Now, we've already learned that there are a lot of rhetorical or literary devices in Second Corinthians, particularly in the second half of Second Corinthians, that we have to kind of sort out, particularly the sarcasm that the Apostle Paul uses. And it gets even a little more complicated here in Chapter 12. So buckle up for this. We're going to look at the first six verses of Second Corinthians Chapter 12, where Paul is going to enlist a bunch of statements. Some of them seem internally contradictory, but we have to sort this out so that we can understand what's being said. And I'll do my best here to help us think through this and come away with something that'll be helpful. Not only as you think about evaluating people who are saying, hey, listen to me, I should be your spiritual authority, which is the direct application of our passage, but also looking in your own life to make sure that you're aiming for the right things and doing the right things as it relates to your own credentials.

Let's read this through with a little bit of commentary here. Second Corinthians Chapter 12 verses 1 through 6, as we see God's authoritative answers to the question, what does it mean to be truly strong, biblically strong? Which of course is what we all need. Second Corinthians Chapter 12 verse 1, Paul says, "I must go on boasting." Really? Next phrase, "though there's nothing to be gained by it." Well, nothing could seem more oxymoronic than that. You're going to boast, but there's nothing to be gained by it. Well, that's an important contrast that you should pick up on right out of the gate. He's going to go on doing something that he's already said is foolish in the last chapter. This is absurd. What are you doing? Well, he's doing it to prove a point. They were doing the very thing that he is now dipping his toe into doing. It's the kind of thing that he's venturing into saying this is dumb, and what he's doing here is getting into a whole new topic. And he says this, bottom of verse 1, "I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord." This topic right here gives us what we don't have historically stated in the rest of the book, what surely these quote-unquote super-apostles that he said earlier were full-blown false apostles were doing. They were saying, listen to us. Here's what's on our resumé. We've had a lot of visions and revelations of Christ. Let's spell it out this way. They



were saying I've had a lot of experiences that you haven't had. And that was going on, and they were giving that to the people, saying listen to us, don't listen to Paul, listen to us. And they were coming into Corinth trying to get all these Corinthian Christians to follow them.

And so he says let me "go on boasting, though there's nothing to be gained by it, I'll go on to visions and revelations of the Lord," like they've been doing. And then he says strangely, in the third person, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven -- whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise -- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows -- and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast." Well, what kind of game are you playing here? In verse 7, he's going to make clear that this whole thorn in the flesh is somehow related to this and he's talking about himself. So he's talking about himself now in the third person, in this weird, oblique way, in this indirect way, he's describing this, but he's already said in verse 1, there's nothing to be gained by this.

And then he says, verse 5, I'm going to boast about this guy as though it's not him, but about me, I'm not going to boast. "Except," here he says, "of my weaknesses." Now, that's what we ended with in Chapter 11. And his weaknesses were what? Now think through them. You can glance back at them. Things like imprisonments, shipwrecks. I was beaten with rods. They threw rocks at me. Right? I was whipped by the Jews 39 times. All of these people were against me. I was hungry and deprived. Anxiety of all the problems with the churches. All these things were costs. All the things were costs. Why? Because he did what he was supposed to do. And that is he spoke the truth. He loved people enough to go all over the ancient world sharing the gospel. And it started as he talked about being lowered in a basket in Damascus, back there in Chapter 9 of Acts. Think about it. Why? Because they were guarding the gates of Damascus so he couldn't get out. He asked to be let down in a basket because they wanted to kill him. They got the governor to agree in Damascus that he should be killed. Why? Because he's going into the synagogue saying Jesus is the Christ. What is that? That's the truth. He was convinced of the truth. He wouldn't back down from telling the truth. That sounds like strength. And in that kind of verbal fortitude, that strength in saying I'm going to tell the truth in season and out of season. Well, it was out of season in Damascus. And they said we're going to kill you if you say this. He's getting let down in a basket. That's a resumé, it looks like a weakness but that's really a resumé of strength. All of that stuff that he incurred because he spoke up for the truth was the kind of thing that he says I'll boast in that.

How far did I go to bring the gospel to people who needed it? Man, I went through all this hardship. How much did I go to care about you, you Corinthians? I bore the daily pressure of anxiety for you and all the other churches that I ministered to. I'll boast about my weaknesses. These guys, they won't even lift a pinky to do anything that's hard. They have, as I said last week, the Gentile perspective on leadership, which is you guys serve me, make my life easier. I have Christ's perspective Paul has been saying on leadership, which is I'll serve you. I will teach you. I'll stay the extra hour, I'll go the extra mile, I'll spend the extra dollar. Let me do for you what Christ did for us. That's the picture. So I'll boast of my weaknesses. We've already seen him do that at the end of Chapter 11. "Though if I should wish to boast." Of



what? Of all the things that he just brought up in verse 1, visions and revelations, "I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I will refrain from it." Why? He already told us, verse 1, "There is nothing to be gained by it." "So that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me." That's an evaluation. If you see something and hear something in me, that's how you should value me, not what I'm telling you that I experienced or saw because you can't verify it. I'm even telling you, I don't even know if my experience was in the body or out of the body. I repeated that twice. I don't know, God knows. I don't know, God knows. I don't even know about the totality of my experience. I can't look up chapter and verse. I don't know. But here's what you can know if you want to look at my resumé. How did I act? What did I say? Those things you can evaluate. You can't evaluate my stories, my experiences.

Okay, with that explanation and reading the text, let's work through some things that I think are going to be helpful for us in the 21st century in a world that loves, as I often say from this platform, to feel their way through the Christian life. Can I sway when I say that? They love to FEEL their way through the Christian life, and they don't like to think their way through the Christian life. That sounds cold to them. That sounds too rational. They don't want to think their way or study to show themselves approved unto God. Second Timothy Chapter 2 verse 15, "A worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." Right? You have to think about what the Word says. You have to rightly understand it. They say I don't want to talk about hermeneutics. I don't want to talk about interpretation. I don't want to talk about exegesis. I don't want all that stuff. I don't want to have to read a commentary to figure out, you know, this "lamp to my feet and a light to my path." I don't want all that. I just want to sit on the swings at the park after all the kids go home and just wait for Jesus to talk to me. Does that sound familiar? Bestselling book. No one? Okay, great. This is good, I have to try. I don't even need the sermon for half of you then, obviously. I can name title after title that feeds the wonderful 21st century let's just... It's an epistemological approach to Christianity which is just you have to feel it, feel it, experience it. I mean, there are books like that -- experiencing God, right? Jesus is calling. Are you listening? I mean, I can go on and on and on. I don't want to step on too many toes. Well, I don't mind a whole lot. That's the whole point of the passage. Tell the truth. Let the chips fall. I want to speak it in love because I am supposed to be an under-shepherd here, trying to keep you from going along with the crowd and saying here's how you ought to think, particularly about experiences or the experiences of others who say listen to me or why don't you try to evaluate truth based on your experience?

So let's think this through because you're going to hear what I'm going to say and some of you're going to go back and read more of the Scripture and say wait a minute. You're going to throw a flag on the play saying you said that Paul wasn't about his experiences and he wasn't even wanting to tell his experiences. And I just read in Acts Chapter 22; he's telling his experiences. So let's start with this point because when he says there's nothing to be gained by all this experience talking, well, boasting about what happened, I just want to tell you what he was doing with his experience when we look at other passages in the Bible, like Acts Chapter 26, Acts Chapter 22, when he tells the experience of this vision on the way to Damascus, this is very different than what he's going to talk about here briefly in a very oblique and indirect way. Okay? Number one, let's put it down this way. We need to "Share



the Stories Worth Telling." There are stories worth telling and we need a diagnostic here. How are we going to determine stories worth telling and stories that are not worth telling? Experiences worth telling and experiences not worth telling. Because Luke is going to say in Acts Chapter 9, here's what happened to the Apostle Paul. He's going to persecute Christians in Damascus. He's coming from Jerusalem and as he's going he hears this voice and this light shines on him. He falls to the ground. He's blinded. He gets taken by the hand as a blind man to Damascus. He meets this Christian named Ananias who shared the gospel with him. He repents and puts his trust in Christ. He stays in Damascus for three years. And in the northern Arabian desert he has an encounter with Christ. He shares the gospel in the synagogues. He's lowered in a basket. He goes down to Jerusalem. That's his experience. That's his conversion story. And in Acts Chapter 22 and then Acts Chapter 26 he tells the story of that encounter with the risen Christ. Right?

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" He hears a voice. Why is he telling that story? Why is he telling that story? It's a story worth telling. Why is that one worth telling but this one is not? Why is it of no value to tell this story but there's a value in telling that story? This is a directional question in terms of what the story is going to accomplish. That's what we need to look at here. It's a lot like when I had to tell the story to my high school friends. I became a Christian right out of high school. Now, in high school I had my whole career mapped out what I wanted to do. I had a full-ride scholarship to go and study music because that's what my life was all about in high school. And so all my musician friends, we were all going to go to college and then meet up in the studios in LA, and we were going to go do our thing. Well, I go off to Bible school, which they wondered how I ended up there, and now I'm doing this thing as lame as this is in their eyes, and they're like we never saw you in the studios in LA. What happened? I had to give them a story. It's called my testimony. And my testimony is here's how Christ redirected my life. And I went back I remember the summer after my first year after becoming a Christian and telling them here's what Christ did in my life.

Now, the question that needs to be asked is why was I telling the story? Was I telling the story so that I could be exalted as some kind of great leader in the lives of all my former high school friends? The answer is no. I wasn't trying to, you know, somehow pitch for some position to be the guru in their lives. I wasn't trying to, you know, apply for some job in their life. I was telling the story. You wonder why I was never planning on doing this and now I am. If you wonder why Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Apostle, or you wonder why Fabarez became Pastor Mike, here's why. Here's what happened. Christ came, convicted me of my sin, redirected my life and now I'm doing this thing that you think is so lame. Here's why. That's called your testimony and I explain that for the sake of Christ. And if I do it right I should be saying that conviction of sin and that encounter with Christ is now really nothing more, ultimately in the big scheme of things, the fact that I don't have to suffer eternal consequences for my sin because God is incredibly gracious and merciful to forgive my sins and to say there's no condemnation for you, Mike. And now I can say to my friends, you know, you need that too. It becomes now a platform for me to say how great is God to architect salvation, and how great is Christ to go and suffer for me so I don't have to. And how great is the Spirit to convict me of sin, righteousness and judgment? Therefore, when I come away from the story of my testimony, or when King Agrippa comes away from the testimony of the Apostle Paul in



Acts Chapter 26 the point is that the exaltation of the Triune God goes up, not isn't Paul great?

The question is who comes out as the hero in the story. Is the person telling their testimony the special one or is God the special one? Is the direction of the story about you or is the direction of the story about God? And sadly, without instruction, when we start having testimony nights in our youth programs, if we're not careful, it just becomes that, that it's about I want to tell you a story about how special I am. And that's not just a hazard for teenagers. That's a hazard for all of us. You can be going around a table at a dinner and everyone's giving their testimony, or a small group or some home fellowship group. Your testimony is not about exalting you or how special you were that God would choose you. Or isn't it great how productive I've been for Christ? It's not about you. It's about the greatness and grace of God. Just like he says to Israel when they were tempted to think they were special because God chose them, he said, I didn't set my love on you because you were greater than all the other nations. It wasn't because you were bigger than all the other nations. Do you know why I set my love on you? Here's God's profound answer. Because I set my love on you. How do you like that logic? I set my love on you because I chose to set my love on you. And because I was keeping a promise I made to your forefathers. I made a promise. I kept a promise. And I did it because I did it. God saved you and you ought to be able to say, wow, "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me!"

If God comes out special in the story then that may be a story worth telling. And I think all of us should be able to tell our testimony. Two and ten, two and ten, two and ten. You have to have a two-minute version. That's the elevator one, in a tall building. And you ought to have a ten-minute one. You should literally practice this. You should have a two-minute one that's not about embellishment. It doesn't make you look like the hero. A two-minute testimony that you can tell to someone who is just standing around, and you should have a ten-minute testimony that you can tell at a dinner table at a restaurant that tells your story about how you came to Christ. Think about it this way, someone goes and has some kind of surgery. They could tell the story and really make it about themselves, right? They could, they could, they could talk about their experience at the hospital. They could talk about who knows what, it could be about them, or it could be about I had this terrible problem, the doctor was amazing, he did this incredible thing, I came through it with a whole new outlook and I feel great now. I mean, that could be a story that is embedded in the people who hear it, that then all of a sudden say you had that, they did this. This guy was skillful in doing that and now you're better. It's like if anyone in their family has the same problem they're never going to forget that and they're going to make sure that they do exactly what you did. And all I'm telling you is one becomes a referral. The story is a referral. The other one is just a story about you. And your testimony needs to be a referral to Christ. So have a two-minute and a ten-minute testimony that both do the same thing. It's a directional testimony that says God is great, not you are great. And every time that Paul is telling stories and you can look at First Timothy Chapter 1, you can look at Philippians Chapter 3. There are lots of examples of Paul telling his story outside of the book of Acts. And when he does all the glory goes to God. Make sure your testimony sounds like that.



And by the way, if you think I'm making this up, in your mind, or you can go there with me, Second Corinthians Chapter 10. We know this is happening even though we don't have the example of them telling their stories of visions and revelations. But look at verse 18 in Second Corinthians Chapter 10, "It is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends." It's not the one who commends himself who is approved, it's the one whom the Lord commends. That little statement clearly is the distinction that he's trying to set up, that these people in Corinth who are trying to get the Corinthians' attention, they're clearly commending themselves. And one of the methods, according to Second Corinthians Chapter 12, that we're now into in the first six verses, they were telling stories about themselves and their encounters with the Lord that were commending themselves. The net effect of the stories and their experiences with God was commending themselves. I don't want any of your stories to be about commending yourself. Your encounters with God should be about commending the Lord, not yourself. That's all I'm trying to say.

Or how about going up to verse 12, same passage. "Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they're without understanding." Which is a nice way to say they're really dumb. That's foolish. What were they doing? The category is those who are commending themselves. Right? But how were they doing it? They were comparing themselves with one another. Picture the bad testimony night where one person tells her testimony and it's really all about themselves, and then the next person tries to outdo the other by even a more dramatic testimony about how amazing they are. Right? And that's the stories that we're being told by these super-apostles. They were outdoing one another. They were comparing their stories. My revelation, my encounter with God, my experience with God was even greater than yours. And this is happening all the time in the modern era. People are on YouTube right now, people are having broadcasts right now, people are writing books right now, and they're trying to say, my experience was even greater than that book's experience, or that podcaster's experience, or that YouTuber's experience. That's going on all the time. And a lot of it is about self-promotion, self-aggrandizement and I'm a better, more important person. You should be listening to me. That's not how experiences or stories should ever be used.

In the discussion questions this week, and I would encourage you all to use them, at least devotionally, if not in a small group. And I would love you all to be in small groups. Psalm 66:16, it just dawned on me today that too many sixes in that reference. Sorry. A little eschatology joke there. Psalm 66:16. Nobody? It's a tough, tough crowd at 11. (audience laughing) Psalm 66:16. I referenced this because there are also sanctification stories, not just testimonies of your conversion. But I love the way that this is put. "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he's done for my soul." I just love the way this is put because it also gives us a diagnostic about a directional question, right? In other words, if I say I want to gather people who fear the Lord and then let me tell you something that God has done for my soul. The appeal is going to be that people who fear the Lord are going to want to hear this, as opposed to I'm going to gather people who really like me. They're going to hear something that God has done for my soul because they really like me and the contact and appeal and the connection is going to be me. I just love that, I want people who fear the



Lord to really like my story of sanctification because it really puts the spotlight directionally on the Lord. Do you follow that? So I want your sanctification stories also to credit God. I mean, that should be one of our theological distinctives. We want all the glory, all the praise, all the applause, ultimately to go to God. Not that we don't credit people for what they do for us. I get that. Give them thanks. Give them honor. All of that is biblical. But when it comes to the stories that we share, some stories worth telling are always going to be our conversion stories when they bring glory to God. They're about God's intervention, God's redirection, God's mercy and grace, all that, clearly. And then there are sanctification stories where I know that the people who fear God are going to applaud the loudest because God is being honored by those stories.

All right. Verse 2. Second Corinthians Chapter 12 verse 2. "I know a man in Christ who for fourteen years was caught up into the third heaven." Okay, that phrase is full of things that need to be untangled, just exegetical. So let's do that exegetical work real quick. Fourteen years ago. This particular book if you know the beginning of this as we thought through it in historical context, was probably written 55 or 56 A.D. So if you go forward fourteen years, that takes us to 42, A.D. 42 and if you put this in the timeline or the chronology of the Apostle Paul, he's already left Damascus. He went down to Jerusalem, he met with James, the half-brother of Christ. The other apostles were not there at that time. And then it says he went into Syria and Cilicia. So he was in Syria. That's where Antioch is. And then he went into Cilicia. That doesn't ring a bell for a lot of you, biblically, but I know you'll know the city. And it's the reason he went there probably is because Tarsus is there. And now Tarsus was the home of Saul, Saul who is Paul. So Saul of Tarsus, that's where he studied at the feet of Gamaliel when he was on his way to be a Pharisee. So he goes back to his hometown. That's the 14-year period. So it was before he went on his missionary journeys and after he left Damascus for Jerusalem. So he's up there in southern Turkey to make it a modern geographic reference for you, Asia Minor they called it in the first century. So he's back to his hometown. And at that point, somewhere he has this experience that he's talking about in the third person. And then it says he was caught up in that timeframe somewhere. I don't know what he was doing, praying, whatever. He was "caught up."

That word, by the way, in the Greek text that translates "caught up" is the word "Harpazō." Harpazō is the word that when it was translated into the Latin Bible by Jerome, it was translated into the Latin word "Rapturo." Rapturo transliterates into English "rapture." That's where we get the word for what's going to happen in the eschatological calendar where God says, the "dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be" raptured or harpazō'ed, or in English, "caught up ... to meet the Lord in the air." So the doctrine of the rapture, this is the same word. It's interesting, too, that he says, "whether in the body or out of the body, I don't know," because we do know that there's precedent in Scripture for bodies being caught off the earth, most famously Acts Chapter 1, where Christ's body ascends bodily off the earth. And in the Old Testament we have some examples as well, which, by the way, when your Presbyterian friends say they don't believe in the rapture, they're kidding you because they do believe in the rapture. They just don't believe in the same timing that your pastor believes in because all of us must believe in the rapture, because it says we're going to be caught up "to meet the Lord in the air," and the word is harpazō. The word is in Latin, if



you want to use the Latin word *rapturo*, in English, the "rapture." Of course they believe in the rapture. We should just ask them this when they say that, do you believe in being caught up? Of course they do because it's in the Bible. So we all believe it. The question is when. I just happen to believe there's the time of Jacob's Trouble, the 70th week of Daniel, that follows it before his Zechariah Chapter 14 moment and the feet touching the Mount of Olives, Revelation Chapter 19 takes place. We may not agree on that, but we all believe that there is a rapture. That's not what the sermon is about. But *harpazō*.

Okay. Now, so I'm just dealing with exegetical things that may come to your mind when you read this. I know a man in Christ fourteen years ago, so he's probably in Tarsus or he may be in Antioch, caught up, *rapturo*, maybe in the body. This is why he's using the word "to the third heaven." So you think maybe my cultist friend who talks about three celestial categories, you know, of heaven, maybe they're right. No, they're wrong. So just say that nicely as I can. They're wrong. They're wrong. There are not three eternal homes. Okay. The word "Shamayim" in Hebrew that translates into "heaven," or the word "Ouranos" in Greek that translates "heaven" is not distinguished the way our English words are for heaven, and that is that we say three different words. We say "sky," we say "space," and we say "heaven." But by heaven, what we mean is the dimension in which God dwells. So in Greek or in Hebrew they just have one word, *shamayim* and *ouranos*. That's the word they use for all three of them and context determines it. Or Paul will use the word *ouranos* here, and he'll say, third, I mean the third one. What does that mean? Not sky, not space. That's all that means here. It's not about as false teachers say, which I'm not saying this is some nefarious thing, it's just a misreading and ignorant reading of the text, it's just a misunderstanding of the Greek term. Third heaven just means we're talking about God's dwelling place.

And then that should be clear in verse 3, "I know this man was caught up," *harpazō*'ed into, and then he uses this Persian loanword we call it because it's taken from Persian, this word that is incorporated in the Greek New Testament, "Paradise." Jesus used it on the cross to the thief, "today you'll be with me in Paradise." That word is describing an idyllic place in God's presence, the third heaven, this dimension in which God dwells. So Paul says I was caught up there into the third heaven, the dwelling place of God and it was an idyllic place. And again, he says, "in body or out of the body, I don't know. God knows -- and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter." So I can't tell you and I shouldn't tell you. And I don't even know really the nature of it, which is part of the problem with the whole experience of anyone. Right? There's this ambiguity to it. Not to mention, could I argue with him if he said body? Well, it probably wasn't body, it probably was just a vision. I can't argue with people's experiences. You know that, right? You can't argue with my experience which is part of the problem of the subjectivity of everyone's experiences. Which is why when people call my call-in show, which some of you know I do call-in shows, I have nothing to say when they tell me about they levitated in their bedroom, or Christ came down and talked through a tortilla or whatever they tell me. I have nothing to say to them. I just say fantastic. Is there a question in this? Right? I have nothing to say. What am I supposed to say? Right? I can say all kinds of things. I can tell them that my dog recited the 23rd Psalm. I can say anything. And what are you going to do? No, he didn't. The problem with subjective experiences is they can't be attested. And all the people saying they have all these phenomenal experiences are all



self-attested. That's part of the problem with this. And Paul's even embedding this in the repeated phrase, "whether in the body or out of the body, I don't know."

So I'm not arguing that he didn't have an experience, but I am saying he is not saying it's worth employing. So there's weakness in the experience in that case. I'll clarify it but let's give the point. Number two, we need to "See the Weakness of Sharing Some Experiences." Some experiences are weak and they shouldn't be entered into the conversation. That's what Paul is in a backhanded way saying about the Corinthians super-apostles. They're sharing their experiences to commend themselves, and they're comparing their experiences with each other to find the pecking order about whose experiences are the most important. Today, it's easy to find the pecking order. We just find out whose books are selling the best or who has more followers on YouTube. That's how we figure out whose experiences are the most, you know, amazing and salacious. Well, in the ancient days these guys were trying to compare their stripes and their insignias and their badges by how amazing their stories were. And Paul's already started saying "there's nothing to be gained by it." And then he says, I can't say anything and I shouldn't say anything about what I experienced. And there's nothing to be gained by it and I'm not going to say anything and if I told you about my experience I wouldn't be lying. But there's nothing to be gained and I'm not going to talk about it. And I think that's a great way to think about some experiences.

Now, if the test in point number one was a directional test, follow me now. If the test in point number one was a directional test does this exalt you, does it go in the direction of exalting you, or does it exalt Christ? That's a good thing. This one has to do with attestation, right? Does this attest to anything? Right? Can you prove anything by this? That's the new question, evidentiary question. Right? Does this experience prove anything? What does it prove? Can it be verified or is it just going to be something you share and it becomes a distraction; it's just an interesting story? And if it is, it doesn't do anything and it may not be worth sharing at all. And that's where I think we should be with most of these stories. But that's not how they're shared.

Let me show you how mostly they're shared. Colossians Chapter 2. Colossians Chapter 2 is how they're shared and I'm sure they were shared this way by the super-apostles, quote unquote, which of course is dripping with sarcasm. They're not super. They're false apostles, but they probably shared them this way. They were sharing them to try and show you how incredibly spiritually mature they are. Like a lot of people who call my program, they call my program to share their experience, to show me how important they are, how spiritually mature they are, why Jesus came and had a chat with them and had coffee with them yesterday morning and told them all these amazing things which they want to tell me, not in person, not in a letter. They want to tell me on the radio so everyone can hear us talking about their experience. That's what they want. Why? This inflates their résumé. Colossians Chapter 2 verse 18. "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism," that's hurting your body for the sake of thinking that you're more godly because you can hurt yourself and you're humiliating yourself, "and the worship of angels," right? These are two different categories but you know that's wrong. Or here's another category. Here's the one I'm interested in, "going on in detail about visions, puffed up," that phrase is used throughout the New Testament for pride,



"puffed up without reason." Right? It's not reasonable for you to be puffed up about visions and going on in detail about them. As I'm trying to say here they prove nothing. They attest to nothing in this regard. And it says, "by his sensuous mind." Sensuous is the word here, the root word "Sarx", meaning "fleshly." So fleshliness and puffed up go together all throughout the New Testament. In other words, we are prideful because we're fleshly. The flesh wants to exalt itself. The flesh wants to be first. The flesh wants to be prideful.

And so one of the mechanisms of the flesh to exalt itself is let me go into great detail about something I've experienced, some experience of mine that makes me feel important. That puts me up in this organization. Now that happens not just in church. It happens in a bowling league. I don't know, I'm just trying to find something a long distance from the church. I'm not saying you can't be a Christian in a bowling league. Enjoy. May you score 300 this week. But all I'm saying is if you ask me was I ever in a bowling league, I will tell you, yes. And if you ask me what was your high game? Right? I can go on into great detail about my high game. Why? Why would I go into great detail about my high game and exaggerate or embellish the story? Because I want to impress you. Because my flesh would want in my pride to make you think more of me than I am. So I would love to do that. Visions in the church are like exaggerating about your golf score, or what fish you caught, or what you scored in your bowling league when you were 13. 178 by the way. (audience laughing) Maybe it's 180, but at least 178. It was in the 170s. It was more than 160. (audience laughing) That's all I remember. "Going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his," fleshly or "sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments grows." The analogy of the body goes on. But the idea here is we hold fast to the head not by an experience but by the truth. We learn about who Christ is, particularly in the Colossians time frame, by learning from the apostles and prophets, and from our perspective by what they've written. And we have it, and we can hold tightly to it.

Stories often prove nothing because the evidentiary question won't prove anything. And can I say the biggest abuse is not just that it exalts you? It exalts you with strings attached and that is it demands compliance. I know I am a magnet for people's outlandish stories. I am. Trust me. I think for everyone in the room I probably heard more stories than anyone in the room. I'm not trying to brag about my experience. (audience laughing) Because it is not a badge. But let's just put it this way. I hear a lot of stories about people's experiences, and then I torture myself by hosting call-in shows where people call. But I've heard plenty of them right here in the lobby and out in the parking lot. And often it comes with the demand of God did this, this and this to me. I saw this, this and this. God spoke to me this way in this time in this place in my bedroom or whatever. And he's telling ME to tell YOU to do THIS. You don't think I've heard that countless times? Countless times. And it's either you should start this ministry, you should do this, you should allow me to do this, this person should be, whatever, fire this guy. I've heard it all because they say because God told me then you should do this. Surely in Corinth there was something that comports with that kind of paradigm. God's given me this vision. You should listen to me. And the Apostle Paul had never shared the things that he had experienced. As a matter of fact, he's going to go on in the next section to say, I was chronically sick because of my vision, and I never even talked about it. And these guys are out there wearing it like a badge, telling you to submit to them, listen to them.



Just like all the books that are written today, not just about people who in terms of epistemology are trying to tell you to seek spiritual knowledge by seeking some kind of experience. But how about people who are writing about their experience to try and sell you books and teach you what's true? How about the near-death experience books? How about the people, they call it the heaven tourism books. Right? "Heaven Is For Real." Some of you had to have read that book. You don't have to admit it here. But you read the book. How about "90 Minutes in Heaven"? You've read the book. There is a whole slew of these. I had to read these when I was writing a book for "Ten Mistakes People Make About Heaven, Hell and the Afterlife." I read some of these because I needed a little section, at least in one of the chapters about these near-death experiences and the books that are written from a Christian perspective. Let me tell you right now why they're tripe, and why almost every last one of them should not be read. You shouldn't pay a dime for them. If you want to read one, go to the library or whatever. Find some electronic version on Google Books or something. But I can tell you why the first category is fully satanic. Do you want to know why? Here's why. I know you want to know why. Even though you didn't answer me. Here's why.

The first category is because so many of those books about I died and went to heaven and now I'm back to tell you all about it, is because they are telling you, so many of them, don't worry about it. I know that you've heard people telling you it's really scary to die. It isn't scary. It was great, I was warmed, I saw my grandma and we had cookies. It was awesome. So I know if you were scared, don't be scared and you'll hear these people interviewed. You know, they'll be on the couch at Fox News. They're telling you, you know what? It's great. I know I was scared of dying, but now I'm not. Have you heard that? Then you haven't read Luke Chapter 16. Because in Luke Chapter 16 Jesus is saying in his story that he tells about Lazarus and the rich man, the end of the story is the guy who dies and goes to hell, in that text he's saying I just want someone to go back. I want someone to go back and warn my brothers so that they won't come to this place of torment. Non-Christians should be utterly terrified to die, and the only freedom from that is to come to faith in Christ. Which brings me to my second reason to dismiss the other category of the heaven tourism books. You should not buy them. You should not read them. You should not think they're real. Because the second category, if they're really going to heaven to check out God's, you know, hang-out dimension, they would give us the good news to get out of going to hell and to get their ticket to get into heaven. And I look, like a good investigator, for the gospel. Where's the gospel in this book? You're telling me your kid went to heaven? You're telling me that heaven is real and that I can get there? Tell me how to get there.

Now, I've read the Bible. I want to read what you have to say the Bible says about how I can have "no condemnation for those in Christ." How do I get in Christ? How do I get there? And I read and I read and I read where's the gospel? And you know what I find? I don't find the gospel. I find some other kind of tripe about, you know, asking Jesus into your heart or something. In these books I don't read about repentance. Luke Chapter 24. I don't read about the atonement. I don't read about the fact that he lives for me, and that I am supposed to be someone who trusts in his righteousness instead of my own, Philippians Chapter 3. I don't read about I no longer live for myself, but I live for him who died for me and rose again,



Second Corinthians Chapter 5. I don't read the gospel in these books. If I don't read the gospel, I know this isn't from God. So I can go on and on. And you may say well I found one right here. Okay. I still am telling you, the only guy I know who I trust who writes Scripture that tells me he's been there to the third heaven, to the dwelling place of God, he came back and his response is I'm not supposed to say anything, I shouldn't say anything, I'm not going to say anything. I'm done. The only guy who was allowed to say something was the Apostle John and he wrote about it. Do you want a heavenly tourism book? Read Revelation Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. That's all you get. And you can read that. It's interesting.

All right. Second Corinthians Chapter 12 verse 5. Sorry, did that rain on your parade? Do you have that book on your nightstand right now? Sorry. Donate it. You can donate it to Compass Bible Institute. We know what to do with it. (Audience laughing) Verse 5, "On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in my weaknesses." Now, what are his weaknesses? I told you, it's all the things that he racked up in terms of cost for doing the right thing, saying the right thing. He spoke the truth and it cost him. He preached the Word out of season and it cost him, just like Christ spoke the truth and they crucified him. Just like he said in Luke Chapter 6, the prophets spoke up and told the truth and they reviled them, they excluded them, they said all kinds of evil about them. And he said, you know what? You should "rejoice in that day, and leap for joy" when that happens to you, "for so their fathers did to the prophets." So this is going to happen. That is going to be the sign of your strength is all the weaknesses that you encounter. "Though if I should wish to boast," about all this vision stuff that all the super-apostles are talking about, "I wouldn't be a fool, for I'd be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than," here's the punch line what, "he sees in me or hears from me." That's the real test. Number three, I'll put it this way, for you having a fruitful next season of your Christian life, "Know that Strong Impact is Made by Loving Sacrifice." Loving sacrifice means you speak the truth in love. And the chips are going to have to fall where they fall. See and hear.

Paul always commends himself not by visions or stories but look at this one. Second Corinthians 4:2. He already said this, "by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves." How do you commend yourself? You speak the truth. How do you commend yourself? You speak the truth. How about Second Corinthians Chapter 6 verse 4. He says, "as servants of God we commend ourselves." And he goes through all the costs: beatings, imprisonments, riots, labor, sleepless nights. And then he ends with this, "and by truthful speech." Same things, the costs. What you see in me, you see how much we suffer for the truth. We go the extra mile. We stay the extra hour. We spend the extra dollar. And we take the extra hits. And we do it because we speak the truth by truthful speech. It's all over the second letter to the Corinthians. Paul's saying don't evaluate my ministry by my experiences that you can't verify. Evaluate me by the truth that you've seen and the truth that you've heard in my life.

You know, in Proverbs Chapter 27 verse 6, we quote it often at least the first part, but remember the second part. "Profuse are the kisses of an enemy," profuse are the kisses of an enemy. That's why you giggled the most at Pastor Jim's words from his recommendation letter in this fictitious story at the outset of the sermon, when they said he's the nicest pastor



I've ever met and he's never said anything I disagreed with. Right? That's a bad sign and you knew it. And that's why some of you laughed at that. Because that's terrible. "Profuse are the kisses of an enemy." But do you know the first part of that verse? Proverbs Chapter 27 verse 6. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." See, the friend is going to tell you the truth, and sometimes it's going to hurt. By the way, I know we always quote that in verse 17, eleven verses later we get the famous verse, "iron sharpens iron," which is a good complement to that. Truth comes from your friend and it sharpens you; it makes you more useful. And it's not going to be done by something soft. Putty doesn't sharpen a knife. Plastic does not sharpen a knife. Right? Marshmallows do not sharpen a knife. You need something hard, something strong. Truth has hard edges. Kiss is very soft. The truth is what we need. We need to speak it in love, I get it, and you need to speak it strategically, I understand it, but you have to speak it and you're going to get some pushback for it.

If you twist the gospel, please just remember that. It's only the power of God when you bring the truth. Paul says, "I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it's the power of God." It's only the power of God when you tell it accurately. Galatians Chapter 1 says even if an angel shows up and they twist it, they don't give you the right gospel, it's no gospel at all. That's what he's saying in Galatians Chapter 1 verses 6 through 9. Don't twist the gospel. Let's just start with that. You twist the gospel which many people do. They don't give you the gospel like the heavenly tourism books I just talked about. If they're giving you some watered-down gospel, they haven't given you the real gospel. It's no good news at all. A twisted gospel is not a gospel. What I need is strength and courage in your life. That's what you need in your leader's lives. To speak the truth when it's familiar, or when it's easy, or when it's hard. We need our actions to be persistent and faithful and reliance to show up, to stay late. We need our words to be truthful, consistent, forthright.

At your funeral, I know that's dark, but if you stick it out at Compass long enough maybe your casket will be up here at the front. Maybe this platform will have your friends and family members here with a microphone, and they'll give a eulogy. A eulogy is the combination of the word "Eu" which is the word "good" in Greek and the Greek word "logos" which means "word." They'll give a "good word" about your life. And the good word that I hope that they bring is "strong." You were strong, right? True strength. And the true strength is that you were willing to be truthful and that it was driven by love, we said that last week, and you were willing to pay the price for that. That may have cost you a promotion. Maybe you didn't make as much as you would have made. You had to have a career that wasn't what you wanted. You know, you gave more money away than you could have spent on yourself. You spent more nights serving than you could have spent, you know, working out and having bigger muscles. I don't know, you did stuff that cost you personally, but you spoke the truth. Because they're not going to be up here talking about your experiences or your vacations or... And let me say this, they're not even going to be talking about your great prayer times or the amazing journals that you wrote when you studied the Bible. They're not going to talk about that. I mean, they're not. They're just talking about things that those things produced. Your prayer life and your Bible study are going to produce, I hope, someone who's strong enough to say what's right, even when it's not popular, to make a strong impact. Not because you sat around



and told people, listen to me because I had this experience, but because you did what you know you should do.

One last passage. We'll end with this, but go to Hebrews Chapter 11, Hebrews Chapter 11. There's a line in here which I think helps to double down on something I said last week that I know some of you may doubt me on. I said at the outset of this sermon too that the Apostle Paul should be considered strong, though he's boasting of weakness, the weakness is the fact that he's put his trust in Christ, not himself. That makes him a strong minister. That makes him a strong leader, that makes him someone who has a strong impact on others. And I hope that at his funeral people said of him that he was a strong Christian. I'm sure they did. Look at the middle of Hebrews Chapter 11 verse 34. Then we'll work around it. After the comma, can you see in the middle of verse 34 after the comma? Talking about these people "were made strong out of weakness." Now that's helpful. We're made strong out of weakness. Now, you know the theme of the chapter and in verse 33, it reminds us that the theme of the chapter is "who through faith." Now faith is they didn't trust in themselves. They didn't trust in themselves. They trusted in God that, in other words, don't say what you think you should say because maybe you keep "kissing" your enemy. You keep saying things that would just fit the, you know, preference or the desire of the moment instead of the truth. No, faith is trusting in God and his Word and doing what you know is right. Saying what you know is true. So "through faith," they "were made strong out of weakness." And what did that do? Look at the bottom of verse 34. They became "mighty in war, they put foreign armies to flight." That sounds like strength. But they were weak. They were weak because they knew that it wasn't about them. They knew it wasn't in their own strength. The fact that they had to trust in God.

Now go back to verse 33, "who through faith," what did they do? They "conquered kingdoms," right? God allowed that to happen. God empowered them to do it. Why? Because they trusted in God. "They enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouth of lions." Right? Who stopped the mouths of lions? Well, Daniel did. Well no Daniel didn't, God did. But why? Because he trusted in God. Look at the impact that Daniel made. Because he trusted in God. "Quenched the power of fire." Well, that's clearly talking about Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. "Escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness," they were strong because they "became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight." Talk about promises and look at the amazing things that happened. "Women receive back their dead by resurrection." That was rare but it happened a few times. "Some were tortured." Why? Because they stood up for what was right. "Refusing to accept release so that they might rise again to a better life." They cared about what was over the horizon, which that theme had already been tackled earlier in this chapter. Now we get into the weakness part, the badges of real strong ministry. They "suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonments. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute and afflicted and mistreated." Now, here's the eulogy, right? Here's the good word, "of whom the world was not worthy." The world didn't deserve people like this. These were strong people. These were godly people. I want people at your funeral to say this was a godly person. You know, the neighborhood they lived in wasn't worthy to have these people living on their block. This world didn't deserve these people. It all starts with the theme of this chapter. Trusted in



God. Even Paul's illness that we'll get into next week was all about making sure his trust was in the right place. If you trust God, you'll be willing to say what you know you should say. You'll be willing to do what you know he wants you to do. What Pastor Jim needed was someone to tell us whether he teaches the Bible accurately. Does he love people sacrificially? Does he stand firm when it costs? Does he speak faithfully the truth no matter what? Those are the kind of questions we need to ask ourselves. If you do, people will see it in you and they will hear it from you, and you will be increasingly strong to the very end of this life.

Let's pray. God help us to end well, to finish strong, to find true strength that we're going to try and talk about here for the next month to make sure that we are faithful to you, which means we need to trust in you fully. And I know that's not easy. I know that takes a risk, the risk of saying that we're going to trust you for the fallout. We may not get the promotion. We may not have everything we want. We may not even have the answers to prayers that we want, because you may be doing something strategic in our unanswered prayers. But what we want is to make a strong impact in our world. So help us to do that. Starting with the people immediately around us, in our church and in our small groups. So God make us truly strong. As we study this great chapter of Scripture.

In Jesus' name. Amen.